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Committee on Conferences
Substantive session

Draft report

Addendum

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III. Review of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000–2001: Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services

Analysis of problems related to career development and vacancy rates in language services at some duty stations

Introduction and overview

1. In paragraph 29 of its resolution 53/208 B of 18 December 1998, the General Assembly expressed regret for the difficulties being faced by language service staff in relation to their career development. In paragraph 30 of the same resolution, the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit a report to the Assembly at its fifty-third session analysing such problems as might exist related to career development in language services, bearing in mind that the numbers and grade levels of staff should be commensurate with the needs of the Organization, and that requirements differed between languages as well as between duty stations.

2. In addition, in paragraph 33 of its resolution 53/208 A of 18 December 1998, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit to it at its fifty-fourth session, through the Committee on Conferences and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, a report on possible measures to alleviate the excessive vacancy rates in language services at some duty stations and ensure the required quality of conference services Secretariat-wide.

3. At its substantive session in 1998, the Committee on Conferences had requested the Secretary-General to submit to the General Assembly at its fifty-fourth session, through the Committee on Conferences, a report on the possibility of introducing a system of

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managed assignments based on non-monetary incentives, which would alleviate the excessive vacancy rates in language services at some duty stations.

4. At its 419th meeting, on 30 August 1999, the Committee considered the reports by the Secretary-General contained in documents A/53/919 and Add.2.

5. The representative of the Secretariat stressed that career development must be understood in its broad sense, involving not only promotion prospects but also reassignment and training opportunities. A review of the post structure at the three main United Nations conference centres had indicated that career prospects compared favourably with the rest of the Secretariat for most of the language staff at the P-3 and P-4 levels, but that prospects for promotion to P-5 were limited. At all other duty stations, promotion to the P-4 and, a fortiori, to the P-5 levels was in many cases contingent upon reassignment to a language service in New York, Geneva or Vienna. In those same duty stations, vacancy rates ranging between 20 per cent and 50 per cent were clearly excessive.

Discussion

6. The view was expressed that the current system of voluntary acceptance of assignments at duty stations away from Headquarters was clearly not working. The recourse to relatively inexperienced translators at such duty stations was not an effective solution since the smaller duty stations had little capacity for training. A system of managed assignments was urgently needed in view of the current high vacancy rates for language staff, especially in the regional commissions. Information was sought on whether the typical language staff member pursued a career with the language services of the Organization or whether there was a high degree of mobility among such staff.

7. In response to questions raised, the representatives of the Secretariat indicated that attempts to adopt a more coercive approach to assignments away from Headquarters had met with some resistance. It was also difficult to establish an acceptable set of criteria for selecting staff members for assignment. In addition to receiving some guarantees regarding a return to their parent duty station upon completion of their assignment, those staff members could be offered incentives, such as enhanced promotion prospects. Generally speaking, the responsibilities of vacant posts in the regional commissions were discharged by freelance staff, pending the assignment of a career staff member. All newly recruited inexperienced translators went through a period of training at Headquarters before taking up their posts at smaller duty stations, where little or no capacity for training was available.

Conclusions and recommendations

8. The Committee took note of the reports of the Secretary-General on career development in language services contained in documents A/53/919 and Add.2.

9. The Committee looked forward to concrete proposals on a system of managed assignments based on career incentives and aimed at reducing the excessive vacancy rates at some duty stations.

10. The Committee also looked forward to the inclusion of the United Nations Office at Nairobi in any arrangement made to address the problem and in any report on the subject.

11. The Committee requested that the reports to be prepared should include additional information on the cost elements involved in the employment of freelance staff, recruited both locally and internationally.